

2009

Shanghai suite and other poems

Glen Phillips
Edith Cowan University

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GLEN PHILLIPS

SHANGHAI SUITE & OTHER POEMS

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SHANGHAI SUITE

APRIL-MAY 2004

and

SHANGHAI JAZZ AND ALL THAT

POEMS 2004-2008

Glen Phillips

2009

International Centre for Landscape and Language
Edith Cowan University

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PART ONE

SHANGHAI SUITE

For Rita

I MELON SELLERS

I have bought you melons
she said. I hope you like
them. Indeed, for she was
a mother even then. On
the street red-cheeked country
women hauling barrows showed
their rosy apples, muscular hands
of bananas, sloe-eyed grapes.

But she had chosen from them
these four small melons. I regret
I did not eat them. But I
had no want of melons then.

II ON THE BANKS OF THE HUANGPU

From the extruded bowels
of Pudong's highest tower,
amazed it could be made
to stand here in the yellow mud
of this great river's delta,
I looked down at barges, cargo boats
and vessels of all breeds and origins.
From this height they could be junks
or sampans, they all look much the same.
An immense oxbow in the Huangpu,
it is part of the artery that is
a Yangtse tributary, curling round
its two banks separating this seething city.
Its river traffic fattens the river to its
high cholesterol count. Threatens to
clog and deliver to that panting organ
its final unctuous ritual of death.
But that is the risk of making
a good living, *shi bu shi? Shi bu shi?*

III YOU SHOWED YOUR HAND

You reached out suddenly
to put your hand lightly
on mine. And just as instantly
drew it away again. Thus fate
touches us, or so it seems,
as the best prepared plans
of man are instantly put
awry by instinct now and then.

I thought to myself, 'You've
played your hand whether
you know it or not. Let's see
where that move gets you *xiao jie*, aye?'

IV WHITE LIE

'Hee, hee hee!' she laughed
lightly, covering her lips,
'I can't help telling my
little white lies.' Were they
a whiter shade of pale or were
they from the nursery paint box?
You have choice of French Grey,
India Red, Burnt Sienna, Delft Blue,
Prussian Blue and China White.
'Anyway,' she said, 'I was born
in the Year of the Snake. That's why
I'm always so cool.' At least
she gave me fair warning. If it were true.

V LONG MARCH

The lake lay reflecting
upon its spring self
the peonies flowering, the snow
of spring willow drifting onto grass.

They say this long causeway
saved Hangzhou from floods
but now tourists flood in
to stroll and bask and cherish
the foresight of Emperor Wu.

We walked that causeway's
whole length to test our
strength of mind and Wu's design.

VI RESOLVE

You held up your arm
like something you'd found
in the street. We crowded
round. Even the guard from
the gate came running to aid
the foreign woman taken
out by a hump in the road
nobody had heeded before.

It's broken, you said. I'm
sure. We hoped not, but
you were resolved. And as
it proved you knew well enough
that old game even Chinese
children play, presenting paper,
scissors, stone. Three white coated
Nanjing surgeons kindly held out
their hands to take your broken bones
and straining set you right again.

Only the sling of misfortune
badged you after that. Was it
the road's resolve to sentence you
to two month's mending for its stone?

VII VISITING RITES

'My kid,' she said,
'I see him once a month.'
But ever since women
bled once a month to
the moon's march across
the night sky, this is the oldest
one child policy or plight:
to give each mother here
a one-in-a billion or so
chance to prove how rich
is this yellow earth. To show
each month's throw of the dice
is a visitation's holy price.

VIII WAKING AT NIGHT IN JUNGONG LU

It was ever a disturbed sleep:
ships moaning somewhere
up the foggy Huangpu; a freight
train shuffling rakes of trucks;
the hee-haw of an ambulance
or the rising scream of police pursuit.

A chair leg shrieks across laid tiles.
someone is coughing in the smoke
of a past midnight cigarette,
a lorry batters iron manhole lids
in the comatose street. Then
a door betrays a muffled
departure, a walker in the road
hums a sad song. There is one
brief cry. Or was it a shout?

Only dogs do not bark in this night
nor cocks crow in the small hours.
Creaks of a bed above or below
as a body turns towards the wall.
Or was it mine? Sleep creeps back in.

IX SLEEPER IN A TRAIN

Through sodden fields this train
urges along, willows just coming
into leaf. Road crossings and
canals flick past. Someone
bends double in a field where
canola already displays forbidden
colour of the emperor's clothes.

Uniformed attendants who could
have served some royal personage
before steam rail challenged
the dragon's monopoly of fire
advance at intervals with wares.
Buyers are few yet they perform
these patient rituals of faith.

Then I see how many of my
fellow travellers loll with
lidded eyes. Rocked by motion
of the mother train they sleep.
One here with open book
fallen in her lap. Another
mutters in sleep. One snores.

I stare again at the racing countryside
Waiting, perhaps, the sleeping giant to awake.

X MAUSOLEUM

Looking back from the entrance steps
you see the way the crowds have come
to revere the good doctor's resting place.

We rest after our long climb through
arch and gate of the Purple Mountains.
Almost a hundred years have passed
as we shake the shuttered lens
to life time after time. Such a long
ascent these flights after flights
through leafy glades. Distant
the would-be-capital's new towers,
Nanjing, steep in morning haze. Now
these hills can cherish a history
of success and defeat, betrayal and hope.

We enter the sacred domed room,
thick with anima of living breaths.
Sweat of veneration, or is it fear
of fiercer futures, rolls down straining
faces? The prone marble figure glistens
as if with ascension's portents even now.

At last we emerge to the mountain's
bracing air. A child screams to its
mother to be taken up.

XI DOING SOLITARY

Downstairs I walked straight past
the guard who wasn't looking
and took in free air. Rather chill
it was but nobody shouted. There
were no shots and I wasn't followed.

Buoyed, I went into the open street
where bicycles whizzed by. A taxi
stopped for a bright young thing in red
with pointed shoes. The bell rang
as a tricycle delivery man for hire
creaked by, his cardboard sign in
characters flapping in the free breeze.

Briskly I walked on, encouraged,
keeping to Jungong Road, not
straying into Hai'an Road at the lights .
It was up to them to pursue me
when they found I had escaped.
I would not try to evade, elude
or dissimulate. My heart was bold.

After I passed the power station
and the sewage farm I began
to hesitate. Was the time ripe?
Do the crime, do the time, it is said.
Slowly I walked back, on the other side.

XII CRUISING DOWN THE RIVER

Maybe it was the last boat
that day for trippers. The crew
smart enough, but barely a
couple of dozen going aboard.

It was a stiff breeze coming
across the delta yet we still
chose to sit out there resolute
on the foredeck as the boat
headed downriver towards
the Yangtse and the sea.

On the left bank handiwork
part dismantled of the old
concessions, dwarfed now by
glazed towers beside Suzhou Creek,
once thick with smallcraft as
eyelashes in a half-closed eye.

This was the division once
between richer and poorer parts
of the foreign plundering. Here
children toiled with hands in boiling
water, teasing silk thread from cocoons.
Sikhs chased goats, they said,
or little boys; Chinese merchants
didn't like the idea of prostitutes
unless under the age of fourteen;
Jews were active in selling opium,
And the English? Ah, the British
sold their souls rotten—keeping dogs
and Chinese from public parks,
women from clubs and children
in sweatshops up to sixteen hours
a day. And from the high seats
of carriage or car, cursed beggars
for getting in their way.

Our ferry swung in the stream
to head back past the Bund and
grey gunboats fluttering with
the red flag flying. Now that's
a turn around for the old Huangpu,
like when the Europeans all turned
round and scuttled out, first for
the Japanese in nineteen thirty seven
and then for the Revolution in forty nine.

The chill on the river decided us
as we chugged upstream, we left
the deck and brisk wind,
turned and went inside.

XIII THE PIG MEN

Every morning sharp at half past
five the pig men pass pedalling
slow but certainly. Across carriers
of both their bikes are draped
the pink nakedness of pig carcasses,
their trotters almost but not quite
kissing again dust of the street.
Where they go or from where
they come retains its mystery.
Only that I know I have been
told that the Year of the Pig
is auspicious for the birth of a man.

XIV FLYING

I first saw the far-flung flags
in the evening sky of Pudong
above the new city's monuments
where a kite addict, I suppose,
furled inch by inch enormous
length of his black and red
opera-masked beauty. But still
out there strained a dozen others
on tugged strings. Quadrilaterals
of time-honoured hues: bats, birds
of prey, warplanes and dragons.
Down below, the kite sellers
ranked themselves in stalls, their
best ones draped like prize washing
for all to see. Children hopping
in delight pointed and begged
while their parents eyed worriedly
the length of string and wondered.

XV THE DOOR TO IT ALL

While having my picture taken
flanking the nondescript door
in a nondescript lane of Xin Tian Di.
I queried the barriers, the flag
fluttering crimson on the wall
by that modest door. It was
where the Chinese Communists
first met, was explained to me.
I thought, so the party started here!

Only five and half decades since
their revolution plotted in this room
we have no right or reason any more,
it seems, to knock at that door. No one
here even pauses to enter the little street.

XVI CHINESE PUZZLES

A big man. He stood on the stage
in his pinstripe suit and addressed
the ranks of eager children flanked
by parents almost as eager to be impressed
by the showman's puzzling trick. All
craned as he took up the long paper strip,
green on one side, the other white. Look,
he said, making a loop, look at me snip.

We all watched as carefully he cut all
along the strip but kept a portion clipped
between finger and thumb. We thought,
ah, that's the trick. Then he turned and quipped
to the kids, I'll bet *you* can guess
what it will look like when I make
the last cut! Adults are no good at this.
Flattered, they did their best for his sake.

After a time, one or another opined
the result would be just two narrower bits.
But adults eager to join in tried to offer
complex theories, suspecting hidden slits
or secret knots or the whole thing coming
out as a one great loop with a twist.
He laughed again, I told you the adults
always complicate. With a flick of his wrist
he showed the wise-eyed kids what he'd done.
As they'd expected: just two strips out of one!

XVII THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

shop after shop with the racks full,
sales-girls frenetic to do a deal;
two gigglers and an old goat with no
words to mouth his gagged requests.

measured up with tapes, trussed
in too-small shirt and pants
he's banished to the change room
no bigger than a laundry bin.

deal done, purchases in bags,
they wheel him into the supermart
to search for soy sauce, dou fu, garlic,
rice. ancestor worship, as good as it gets.

XVIII THE HONEY MEN

They say in Old Shanghai
one of the choice morning sights
was the indefatigable honey men.

To and fro they plied their wares
earnest regular contemplative men
loaded with wisdom rural and urban.

In pretty blue and white these days
helping to bring beans, melons and salads
truly well nurtured to your table

from the market garden farms
every day, to Quyang, Anshang or Yangpu,
these shit tankers have replaced the honey men.

XIX ABREAST OF THE TIMES

In the villa garden
all was peace. Outside
traffic roared at the gates,
elevated freeways peered
from afar but advanced
no further. Here the party
had commandeered
a relic of colonial wealth
fit for their functionaries.

Eros (or was it Venus?)
coily unclothed in marble
whiter than snow perched
on an elevated plinth.
It seemed a background proper
for the photo opportunity
with her, so we stood close
abreast for the digital wink.

XX MAY DAY

May Day. And each taxi and truck
seems to have decided itself to keep
the red flag flying. On national TV
there is some marching between soccer
games, the market's rise and fall
and the latest delegation
from the West seeking to forge
what they call closer links.
As they step from the plane, flowers
are presented by smiling Chinese maids.
Greetings made, the joint enterprise
retires to the conference tables replete
with more flowers and thermos flasks
for the chrysanthemum or jasmine
tea. And whom do you think, to forge
this link, has brought the safety chains?

XXI HE POINTED OUT HAI'AN ROAD

Maybe he thought I paused
at the cross road lost in space
of this megapolis? Touched
by the sun as I peered from
side to side? So he rushed across
red-faced to point to the sign: Hai'an Lu.
Peaceful sea road, I knew it said
for I was about to step in inferno
of a dockside street where the mega trucks
and motorcycle combinations, articulated
trolley buses, hell-bent black cars
and blind tri-cyclists came at you
from every corner of the earth, even
when the lights went green. I thanked
him for his concern as best I could,
and thought wistfully of a peaceful sea.

XXII THE VICE SQUAD

How many vices do they have
a squad for? Old Shanghai
would have known. Here
now on campus fearful
of concupiscence they peer
behind bushes flashing lights
at night. Seeking to disarm
the combatants, maybe they say
Comrades, make war not love!

XXIII COFFEE GROUNDS

Black, black coffee has a function
in our lives greater than supreme unction.
For all the tea in China, coffee blends
fly higher, faster when the caffeine sends
you above the streets and offices, floating
over pearly tower, department stores, bloating
trade conference edifices of aesthetic pride.
You fly on, fuelled with short blacks, glide
over the Huangpu, the Bund, where wei guos'
ships unloaded this first secret drug dose,
more powerful in the end than opiates
for the people. Yes, each sack of beans creates
a thousand doses, roasted and slowly dripped
by Oriental barristas at Starbuck bars, equipped
with Marco's espresso machines, foamed
with the monkish cappuccino crowns and downed
one after one until your eyes burn to white dwarfs
and your hands begin to shake, your laughs
die of drought in your throat. Then, my friend,
we remember the pact. One tribute we extend
to each other over the years as sister and brother.
It's the truth: one good cup deserves another.

XXIV A BETTER VIEW OF THE PIANO

This was posh, really posh, he thought,
eyeing the alabaster pillars, ceiling overarched.
In the grand old days of the concessions
they spared no expense to build a place
where diners might take a little opulence
with the evening meal. Table for two
he asked the Maitre 'd, thinking to himself
lions head soup, roast duck Shanghai style,
pickled turnip and mushrooms...a slight cough
from she by his side. He turned testily,
Yes? What is it, my dear? A finger
Pointed to something obscured by flowers
and carved mahogany screen. Another
cough and he understood. Motioning back
the waiter he explained, My wife here
would like another table. The waiter frowned.
Look here, I'm a reasonable fellow, he told him,
but the meal comes with music I understand?
Then we demand a better view of the piano.
His wife, number two, murmured support and
he spoke more sharply, Chop, chop my good man.

XXV LUST ALLAYED

Hereabouts I'm told there was
a custom observed in rural families.
They gave their twelve-month-old
a baby chick or other animal,
so small the little toddler could
wring its neck, crunch the life
out of it somehow. And thus
they forestalled violent acts
in their child's coming years. You
think of Red Guards. Oops! Maybe
the system's not perfected quite.

XXVI GETTING OUT ON THE WRONG FLOOR

Lost in thought
you sure can
step right out
of a lift you
expect to go
straight down
to the ground
floor. Only it
has stopped
for someone
else to get in.
Looks stupid
when it dis-
appears and
leaves you 9
floors above
ground. However, should you happen at the time

no less! Yes!
is comrade
word for that
friend? The
call that, my
What do you
better than you.
you're going
to know where
always seem
inside. They
haul you back
your lapel and
souls will grab
in a lift, kindly
to be in China

XXVII IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE...

Doing rather well, I thought,
the interview going like a charm.
And I was my most charming
self. It seemed then that
something distracted. I tried
harder to please, to give more
than was humanly possible.
At least that's how it felt
until the thread faltered
unravelling. I was undone.
I followed the gaze directed
at my left breast. Finger
was pointed. A small matter
had usurped me it seemed—
a brown stain and a blob.
I think, sir, you have some
marks, she said, on your chest.
I knew that already and reached
for my hanky. Sure enough
it was bird shit. I was
shot down, like a bird, like a plane...

XXVIII PROMETHEUS BOUND

Huo or 火 is the word for fire
and you can add *ch'e* to it for train,
chien for rocket or *hsien* for fire
insurance. Not much use if
the standard municipal response
to your house burning down was
to beat a big drum to scare
the fire demon away! They
were right in a way, but
it took time—and your house!

Now as I stare out from the twelfth
floor flat over the studded stalagmites
of this spreadeagled city, sixteen
million strong, it's all fired-up
by that ass Prometheus's meddling.

PART TWO

SHANGHAI AND ALL THAT JAZZ

SHANGHAI AND ALL THAT JAZZ

On tour. It's Shanghai tonight, they say.
The little band of travellers, tourists
from Au Da Li Ya step heavily down
from their luxury bus in Nanjing Lu
and receive brass keys to colonially
spacious rooms in what they now call
Peace Hotel, the Bund a few steps
away. Here many a famed westerner's
form reclined thankfully on laundered
sheets in Sassoon's halcyon days, when
Coward wrote 'Private Lives' and Shaw
or Chaplin savoured an admiring glance.

But after supper our tour leaders declared
we'd be entertained in the famed Jazz Bar
by legend's long playing old jazz band
still thumping 'Lazy River' and 'Ye Shanghai'.
So we tapped a toe with a glass of Qingdao beer
in hand. Found anything but peace til 2am.
After all, it was 'Crippled Sassoon' who
made sure the Bank of China remained
twelve centimetres lower than the Peace Hotel.

ANTICS IN A NEW GARDEN

It's an old custom here in Shanghai they say, maybe because they're an easy-going lot, a city that grew on the rump of confident Western cargo cults. Perhaps Western striped pyjamas first were seen here in French or British villa gardens where Papa or Daddy strolled in the stifling nights of tropic summer long before the Sons of Heaven came to bark and bray and behead the real Shanghaiese who dared to defy or merely got in their way.

So, in those balmier times maybe it entered the minds of the Chinese here that 'jamas' were so stylish they'd not waste wearing them merely as slumber-wear. Therefore each day, even now, we see boldness of pyjama-clad Shanghaiese wheeling supermarket trolleys around the new supermarts, popping down to the corner shop for a brace of steamed buns or a packet of prawns. Or outside their new Western style apartment blocks prop and chat in night dress and ponder perhaps movements of the Hang Seng or the Nikkei or their own Stock Exchange.

Still, when I meet, on a narrow path of a spring evening mild, some fully Bananas-in-Pyjamas-clad citizen and begin the age-old step aside, no you first, kind of dance, I recall that picture book of my youth when 'the bears wore slumber wear, even the llamas put on pyjamas' and ceremonially some creatures maybe from islands just across the sea said, 'Shall we make the tea?'

CEMENT SLEEPERS

Thunder of guns in Jungong Road?
No, only another 'artic' rumbling past,
bouncing steel seatainers in its tray.

And then the lorry loads of cement
in bags. Among the bags what looks
like grey rags but it's a man, no.

two men lying on their backs, one
with a dirty dust mask half over
his mouth. They smoke or kip,
it's hard to tell. One thing sure, from
my own childhood years in Perth
down wind of Portland Cement,

their lungs will be well and truly dusted.
Lucky I got away to the South West
forests where I breathed with the trees.

But these men, bedded on bags to build
new docks or a subway, won't get such
a break, as their tumbrel takes them off.

EXPOSURE AT LAST

The traffic streamed down
Zhongjiaxui towards us
as we gingerly stepped from one
broken pavement piece to the next.
Passed shop after shop with
garlic and spice smells promising to make
happy customers when noonday comes.

In the photographer's shop
courtesy and puzzlement.
Not too many come here
to take their own photographs.
Still he pulled down his blind,
let us line up left and right
right and left to be exposed.

It made me think of the shots
they take of prisoners. You never
can tell by looking what goes
on in their minds. But we weren't
facing a term behind bars were we?
Unless you count that fever to spend
a solitary confinement yet to come.

GREEN FOOD LTD

The picture placard was the open steppes,
meadows where sheep grazed down
to drink at a pristine stream,
blue skies decked with clean cloud shapes.

Daily the lorries backed and filled
unloading their packaged cuts of pork
or beef or flesh of those unfrocked
sheep, while ant labourers stacked and culled.

Behemoths emptied, were joined again
with the turbid bloodstream of dockyard
streets, coagulating at cross roads where blood
and grass green pulse to pause, go on.

Back at Green Food Ltd, hordes of small vans
come to load scarcely-chilled white parcels
bound for the city's woks, frypans and grills.
Even as they scurry, fresh loaded lorries draw in.

At the entry gates, rival stockpots wait
for diners. Cooks sweat to claim footpath
space for tastes: there's chicken feet,
pork trotters, and sheepshank broth.

Dusk at Green Food Ltd; at last a lull,
you walk past on the other side
quickenning to respect the dead,
trying not to sniff the charnel pall.

SHE TOUCHED ME

The oarsman slid the tourist craft
down green water alleys of Wuzhen,
between whitewashed houses,
under arched stone bridges
and past the tea house beneath
stooping willows. Rain fell softly,
fluttering on the boat's canopy,
echoing chat of these students
taking a cheerful study break.

Suddenly a laughing girl turned
to my minder. "She's asking" he
said, "can she have her photo
taken with the grey kangaroo."

I could only agree, it seemed
uncool to refuse. But her idea
of a casual pose was to first
rock the boat with her lunge
to tug me so close in that
touching moment, as her friend's
camera flashed, that I knew
I sensed the flame of youth.

HULLO, HULLO, HULLO!

You hear this greeting
from the first in every street:
Hullo! Change money? Hullo!
Buy Rolex?

Or just glad to meet
a westerner, maybe. Half in fun
half friendship. To their mates, a feat
of linguistics—look at me! I dared
to step out of my culture. Pretty neat?

Still I was surprised
that afternoon in the corridor
of the shiny new university
building when out of a door
popped a six-year-old: Hullo!
Hullo! But then he bore
me by the hand into inner
sanctums where I saw
his mother typing at her desk.

Presented me with smiles
and more 'hullos'. She seemed
taken aback, looking over her files
all stacked up. Spoke sharply as one
well used to her son's little wiles.
Perhaps to say, boy, how many times
have I told you? Shush, no denials!
You're not to bring in stray pets?

Not wishing to be involved, I guess,
I patted the little fellow's wiry head
nodded and smiled at what she said
as if I savvied. And made myself scarce.

TIDES AND GROUNDWATER

What could kill me is the groundwater
of our love which has risen as trees
were cleared from the space, so we
no longer stay unseen by each
other, hidden in dark shadows
of standing forests. Knowing wild
impertinence of passion, my salt tears
whiten the earth. And I tread red clay
until my footprints show on this
surface that grows ever more silvered
than my hair will be. Is this, then,
how I must learn to die for you?

That salt moon up there which shines
down on the canal's lapping surfaces
is drawing the dark tide into this harbour
to rise among saline posts and piers
until we feel its cool liquid incisions
link our bodies with its drowning touch.
Was our love so heated only the moon's
cold power could quench fires
that would consume furious hearts?

IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER

Chairs scrape and the patter
of tiny feet. The television
drones on about some convention
in Dalian. The tea mugs
grow cold, the epaulettes
have faded, the braid no
longer has its old sheen.
Only adverts for dish wash
liquids, nutrient shampoos,
body lotions and such. The patter
is manic now. Before communion
there must be the preparation,
offertory, revelation of the Host.
Bedsprings creak. Blessing bestowed,
after murmurings there is sleep.
In the small hours small disturbances;
finally, towards morning, somewhat
late the tension breaks for her. Brief
moans come quickly. At last replete.

Shortly the iron gate of the outer door
clangs shut. A taxi briefly slows,
draws into the kerb, swings away
towards another suburb. Another
business trip (that's his excuse) is complete.

EYES AND BUTTERFLIES

They're not chrysanthemums
on my collar you told me.
I looked again and could see
they were indeed two butterflies.

Do you know, you said to me,
that it's supposed when a mother
kisses her son goodbye, another
kind of confusion flutters his eyes?

But if you know boys really well
your son would blush if heard
by his school chums being referred
to by his mum as a big blue butterfly.

It takes years growing to manhood
for that boy to hear his sweetheart
say such playful phrases. And the art
to respond with a butterfly's touch
on the lids of her closed fast eyes.

SHANGHAI REFUSE

Brisk walks to work bring
the blood to your face in spring.
Talking about early spring of course
is apt when there's a fresh source
of a shower almost every day
and the wind can whip some way
along Hai'an Road in from the sea.

So, stepping out over cracked, ugly
paving stones, I see this path beside
the roaring traffic stretch with the tide
of cyclists, burdened buses, trucks, all

on the way to work—you might recall
it is work, the party says, makes them free.
For if you work, then you get to eat, see?
That's what puts warm food in the belly
and a bottle of beer in front of the telly.

But walking on, you notice garbage out,
the sort that's wrapped up in a stout
black plastic bag. But, what's that stuck
out the end? Something like truck
tyre treads squirm. My god, it's a pair
of makeshift shoes! A vagrant is there
sprawled on a low wall by the verge
all wrapped in a plastic strip. The urge
to work is defied by this man. Now I see,
resisting work is the one way to be free!

RAT IN MY POCKET

Born in the year of the Rat
I wondered could I retrace
my steps, memorise the way
back to you? All these twists
and turns of the daily rat race
yet still I insist to find the signs
you left to guide me, trusting
at the windows you set in place
lamps to show me this was home.

RAIN ON BRIDGES

The sound of rain on black umbrellas
in the canals of Wuzhen: it's small thunder
in a day of steady downpour, like mourners
broken by grief. And here people pick their
way over sodden flagstones under gouting
eaves that cascade on coat collars until
they stumble upon arched stone bridges.

I shared umbrellas often with you in the streets
of Shanghai, under surprise spring showers,
walking with bicycle between us and the rain
pattering on the umbrella, like butterflies
trapped in a paper bag. Or is it rice shaken
inside a child's toy drum? Or maybe it is
a foretaste of tears falling, falling on
an unopened, inkstained envelope to you?

But Wuzhen taught me about bridges;
they arch over dark waters, take us safely
to other shores where life starts again. You
can go on, even if your skin still chills
with the unwelcome touch of fevered hands;
the burning breath and dry lips of a thief.
For, beyond the bridge's symmetry, you find
not just another row of villages houses
but another land where the sun dries up the rain.

SHARING

(for L.P.)

Suffering: it is a real woman's task
to take finally the harder road
while someone listens to the pipa
far, far away from that music's home.
They say such tunes are food for love.
But what sustenance is this? When
thousand after thousand ocean miles
drown out the singing of plucked strings
with sea's rough work of waves and howl
of driven salt winds across the crests.

After the song has ended you walk
on broken paths in the desert silence.
Over granite rocks air shimmers as heat
rises. Strange mirages show like plates
of darkness, like the shapes of demons,
dragons, avenging spirits of torment.

But the light changes over the land
and rain showers follow. Then in
warm sun brilliant desert flowers bloom.

THE ENFEEBLEMENT OF DREAMS

Legend and literature are full of old men
whose eyesight dims. You hold a chicken
helpless, noticing the opaque film which
moves rapidly across its eyes like
a premonition of death. But it is
true the cataracts in the eyes of men
are indeed harbingers of the end.

Those who love, yet must live apart,
find each day of separation
passes another shadow between them,
no matter how they strive to hold
brilliant images of farewells—when
tears rolled. And the last impress on lips
faded. Then, day by day, impossible
Arcadies of impassioned embraces darken,
as they face enfeeblement of wildest dreams.

TWO POEMS FOR A FRIEND

I

"The bright-eyed Zhejiang beauty dresses at dawn" Lu Xun

A pair of doves wait by my bird bath,
the terracotta basin that stands there
in my garden. Watchfully, patiently
they expect their turn, while quarrelling
honey-eaters, wattle birds and wrens
swoop and splash and rustle feathers
busily. So are they doves of peace? Should
we also wait so patiently, so demure,
our love silent except to us? Will we
one day know it is our turn to make
a splash in the bright water? Shake
the silver drops among roses and peonies
as, cleansed of careworn days and quietude
we take wing and fly on the wind to meet
the warmth of sun, freedom of the air.

II

"Solemnly the girl from Qin plays her lute of jade" Lu Xun

From the thunder of the street
I ascended the high apartment
tower in the elevator's hush.
My feet dragged me where to push
that button for the bell and wait.
While the world outside roared remote
from me, I fought the devil within,
the memories, put there by fumbling thin
fingers, the struggle to possess my lips
the arms embracing gripping for my hips.
I pushed back images of disgust and fear.
Then the door opened. A different man was there.

**ON THE TRANSFER OF
GENERAL YE JAN YING
FROM SHANGHAI TO GUANGDONG**

Waiting for her,
I and my old veteran
of a thousand shots,
battered a bit,
crestfallen, yet the one-eyed
wonder who has dragged me through
many a hedge of thorns
to wake the soft-haired
sleeping beauty with his kiss.

And so, companion-in-arms,
my little general, the one
I never asked for,
the one I can't retire, promote
or redeploy to another province,
when you prove too wilful
for my own good, will
you be in good form this night?
Looking for her
I wait and see

ON A HIGH

(from the Sky Arena 94, Pudong, Shanghai)

The woman froze in foetal crouch
in angle of glass floor and wall.
Four hundred meters up we were
from the old alluvium of Pudong,
the real floor of the burgeoning
citadel in haze that stretches long —
all the way to kingdom come
in our ancient nursery lore.

Face contracted with her pain
and like an infant reddened at birth
she writhed in terror of falling down.
Over and over she'd foretold, no doubt,
her free-fall plummet, a flawed
bungee jump, to leave her life behind.
Down to join the teeming crowds below
who scurry on that live mosaic of mud.

So I obeyed her cry, 'Leave me alone!
I'll be ok soon.' And I too stepped
with care, keeping eyes raised from
the new face of Shanghai down there,
bristling with high-rise, like the stubbled
cheeks or chin of some tough movie
star on set. Ready to be Daring Dan,
hero, who can also entice the heart.

Now, thinking of that weird pang
you get in the bowel or other part
when you confront insane heights
you wonder is it a strange ancestral
trigger, perhaps, which allies somehow
with taboo dangers of sex? Or is it
remembrance simply of childhood alerts?
Always to respect that icy breath of death.

SHARING A SLICE OF PIZZA

I battled through so many days
to sit here amused with a slice of pizza
in my hand. While you mirror me—
hand also poised and say 'this is good,

the mozzarella is so good.' Yet I
travelled over freeway arch
and thrust, passed by pagodas
ancient as those long stone walls

that trace precise capillaries
on the land's flesh, crossed swart rivers
lined with boat and barge. Stopped to climb
step after step of Buddhist monasteries

high on Chengde's hillsides, or
paused on pale lenticular bridges
in palace pleasure gardens among
herds of deer. By green pools where

crimson fish clustered to feed,
I longed to be home with you.
But must journey on through more fields
of spent cornstalks and fresh cabbages.

On over brown mountains where
bright persimmon lanterns light up
leafless trees like multiples of the late
autumn's dying suns. And ochre

corn cobs are laid to dry like precise
imperial carpets on roadsides
or the flat roofs of farmhouses;
then heaped in farmyard corners.

Almost at the last we left behind
the scimitars of beaches
where warships once shook
the waters with spouting salvoes.

And here now the air cuts my face
sharper than pruning knives in orchards

of apples and apricots. For in Yangpu
the air courses up river past Pudong.

It gathers leaves at kerbs and gateways,
shakes the last green weeds beside
broken masonry as cyclists wheel by.
That wind has joined me here in my search.

And you have come finally in greeting
reluctant or tentative as a sparrow
that darts from out shrubbery to take
almost forgotten warmth of a winter sun.

WAITING

*'It has been long since I said to him good-bye.
When shall we be together again?' (Xu Zaisi—Yuan Dynasty)*

Days pass, the road grows longer.
I trip on high kerbs, step over
every cracked unmarked fissure,
cross to right or left, the seeker
always of a better way. You linger
in your youth, distracted ever
by a bird's song or pretty flower.

But my youth has long ago gone
and winter threatens to be done
with me. Yet I persist. And turn
to wait for your light step alone.
It is your high spirits soon
to be shared for which I yearn,
as I sit waiting on this bench of stone.

WHEN YOU CAME TO ME

All that evening, hedged between
toasts in Chinese to mutual friends
I fumed and brooded. You chose
other company. Declined vacant
place offered next to me. Was this
rough justice? Your head bent towards
others, you seemed just one more
of the other many wives who politely
joined the evening's celebrations—
wishing to be elsewhere, at their own
hearth fire with family, perhaps. I tried
to plan to begin another life, in some
parallel universe. But could not still
the stupid turmoil raging within;
distract myself with this next dish
or that. I made myself converse pleasantly
with my fellow celebrants. Rattled my
glass on the table with unfelt Christmas cheer.

Then you did come, when you judged
it was time. Or so it seemed. I was so glad
of your greetings for they sent despair
flying from that prisoning room. Like
an addict or patient desperate for relief,
I cared not your reason to rescue me
from that clamorous company. For I
must believe it was for past times
you came to me. And gave my soul ease.

LOS/T

So I say a prayer for you
in Shanghai's downtown
dockside clutter of streets
and burgeoning new flats.

Humanity has its flow
and ebb. You never know
for sure which way the tide,
or the Huangpu, flows. And we ebb
and flow but never stand still.

Each day or week, another change
as we grow like old friends,
old in the ways of love; sometimes,
like newlyweds, eyes bright,
or more as children who unwrap
their new year gifts in sudden delight.

Sampans on the river's cluttered creeks
show families you never knew
going about their busy lives: rice
stuffed down from a bowl; wash dish
swirled and emptied overboard; clothes
strung as faded flags from a wheelhouse.

You look closer and then you see
this is our own family puttering past.
Somewhere we must have boarded
another craft; leaving them sailing on,
unaware, maybe. Had we lost out?

BY BUBBLING WELL ROAD

If you look into this old Yangpu River
where it flows past wharf and pier,
past creek and bridge and tower,
you see in its darkness the floating weeds
the murk of muddied lanes and streets,
the spent humours of the multitudes
who have endured dynasties on these banks.

The delta's drainage meets the ocean's tides
and the outflow is all the ends of lives.
Nearby waits the great Yangtse's flood
that spends its strength through highland
and gorge, tumbling from distant tributaries.

When morning's eastward paleness lights
the pall over all these sprawling suburbs,
I think of fresh mountain streams that plunge
among the rocks and have so many thousand

Yangtse miles to run. Such young torrents
have no patience for the last slack reaches
of an indolent river. Darkened waters resist
embrace of open seas; measure time's
vast stretches passing swiftly and forever.

EXPOSURE AT LAST

The traffic streamed down
Zhongxiasui towards us
as we stepped from one
broken pavement to the next
passing shop after shop with
cooking smells promising happy
appetites when noonday arrived.

In the photographer's shop
courtesy and puzzlement.
Not many think to come here
to take their own photographs.
Still he pulled down his blind,
let us line up left and right
right and left to be exposed.

It made me think of the shots
they take of prisoners. You never
can tell by looking at them what goes
on in their minds. But we weren't
facing a term behind bars were we?
Unless you count that fever to spend
a solitary confinement yet to come.

EXPRESSING LANE

(eight items only)

Picture a shiny supermarket
in a Shanghai suburb's street
amid rubble of exploits now
long past and new fervour
of blossoms in cement and steel.
Still the many melon sellers
and the trinket men crowd
the old footpath of puddles
leading to the grand new-paved
concourse to 'take-away' spoils.

Inside the aisles tremble
with glittering trolley loads
of packaged noodles, tins
of beans and bamboo shoots,
sauce bottles, clothes pegs, sweets.
I fast-forward. I dart from
row to row, my chariot stacked
and stashed and ready to go.

My bee-line to the check-out
checked I veer right to a queue
that looks the shortest, below
a bilingual sign that I choose
to ignore for the nonce, replete
with my victory over this
temple to consumption's speed.

A tall gent taps me on the shoulder,
points to the sign I wouldn't read
and says in perfect English, 'Chum,
can't you read? It says
eight items only, savvy?'
I search hastily for a tongue
to pretend I'm Spanish, French
or a Lithuanian. And sheepish
go through, while the whole queue
stands and stares and the lass
on the till registers my error
without the blink of an eye.

LOSING THE WAY: a warning

You say you do not know
these streets.
That you always somehow in
these streets
lose the way. We search down
these streets
and up another way for book stores.
These streets
lead us all the by-ways of Shanghai.
These streets
lead us by autumn leaves to books.

You say you do not know
the pages
of these books, these bookleaves. But
the pages
of books are like streets in writers' minds.
The pages
are like days, falling like leaves;
the pages
mark the end of spring and summer,
the pages
you get lost in, searching the writers' ways.

YOU ARE LOS(T)

New cities have new freeways,
fly-overs or curving underpasses
all for the love of getting there
or getting away. It seems you have
one eye on escape these days. Signs
of panic too at the worst scenarios.
So where is love of the old in all
this? Is it a new exit I missed?
The signs are big enough but so
big maybe I forgot to read them,
and am I now where the freeway stops?

HOW TIME FLIES IN SHANGHAI

Opposite us, the bamboo scaffolds reminded
the rush of shafting high-rise towers
which cost life after life of displaced
peasant workers, come here from
distant provinces. They'll have no papers
but are measured like the bamboo's
notched bones. So easily rendered
by the master painter, whose
ink-soaked brush pauses,
kisses and strokes the silk again
with consummate touch.

But this side
of the crammed street was for repasts.
Workmen crowded into the little eatery
where the linen was used at least twice
and sweating hands urged stools closer
to the tables when the *pi jiu* foamed
into every glass. Chopsticks poised
then pounced as dish followed dish
and the steamboat bubbled centre
of their jollity. Meanwhile above
in the yellowed plastic chandelier
a proletariat of flies poised for
the moment of descent.

Buzzed happily
over bare arms and full plates
while the waitresses, bursting from
too-tight blouses, swatted and struck
to no avail. Better just to endure them
perhaps? I voted we should wait
till later for our meal. Let
the flies have it. So we left.

THE BUND IN SPRING

So this is the river which you
cannot step into twice? Huangpu
flows slow and steady toward the sea;
and the tourists pause as if to agree
that since in the Bund the foreign park
is gone with its insulting sign (like dark
days of winter). They find themselves to be
the guests now of spring sunshine,
see the plum and cherry trees explode
in smoky blossoms along Zhongshan Road.

Across the turbid waters that throb
with barge and tugboat, where ferries bob
and weave among river traffic, witness
the ambition of a many-towered metropolis.
Pudong furrows and fields have woken
from centuries of seasonal toil, forsaken
trust in ritual tillage and household gods
for new gods of glazed pride for the crowds
to gape at—bookleaf spires and startling globes
of azure and rosy pearl. Graphs of fiscal probes
map futures markets, follow seasonal trends
of GDPs, upward thrusts for spring-like ends
to financial years. The market is blowing
through glass ceilings, hurtling with flowing
indices like cornucopias. No matter, you
too will soon celebrate with bottles of cola
foaming out, as in telly ads, all over hands,
like human kindness milked from glands.

O the Bund! In spring it promises so much,
yet when we turn from the prospect, lurch
towards Nanjing Road and the press of flesh,
we see rain again on streets glistening afresh.
If spring has come, can winter then be far
behind? We raise umbrellas in subdued hurrah.

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CREATEC**

The Shanghai Suite was written during a two month period in early 2004 while I was a visiting professor teaching a course in 'Western Culture' at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. This was also part of the research for my PhD in Creative Writing. During and after those months, I composed most of the poems about Shanghai and that region of China. These formed one third of the poetic component of the degree. As well, I researched material for a novella based on the Japanese attack on the Chinese quarter of Shanghai in 1932. The novella Afterwards also formed part of the prose component of the PhD.

Some other Shanghai poems have been written mostly in subsequent years for I became a regular visitor to USST and other universities in the Zhejiang, Shandong and Jiangsu provinces.

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